



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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Two new, 'hot' PC products worth ignoring

Not everything new and "hot" is necessarily a good deal. Indeed, in the world of personal computers, there are many products that appear to have value on the surface but turn out to be disappointing.

Today I'll discuss two such products that have been heavily advertised in computer magazines: hard disks mounted on circuit boards (designed for easy installation) and IBM PC-compatible portable computers with LCD screens. Both products have many attractive features but some surprising drawbacks as well. To their credit, most local computer stores don't carry them, but thousands of people are being seduced by the advertising for the products nonetheless.

Technical wizardry

Both products represent amazing technical accomplishments, and that's the primary reason they are so attractive. Big, bulky components have been miniaturized and performance sometimes improved as well.

Hard disks (the 10 or 20 megabyte storage devices needed to supplement IBM PCs for business use) usually are installed in a special section of the computer toward the front of the cabinet. If you have an IBM PC or compatible computer without a hard disk, professional installation is typically required. But now, small hard disks are being produced already installed on a "drop-in" circuit board that fits into one of the open "slots" within the computer. Manufacturers of the board-mounted disks claim that anyone can insert them quickly, simply by removing the computer's cover and plugging it in.

When first announced about six months ago, the new disks created a stir in the industry. A flashing "+" is programmed to appear in the corner of the computer screen whenever the disk is being accessed instead of the small red light that normally lights on the computer cabi-

net.

The disk-drive makers recognized a "hot" concept immediately. First one, then two, and now at least six manufacturers have jumped in to produce the small board-mounted drives. The advertised cost is about \$900 for 10 megabytes or \$1,200 for the 20 megabyte version.

In the case of the new portable computers that are IBM-PC compatible, a similar situation developed. About a year ago, Data General was the first to come out with a unit so small it could fit inside a briefcase. They used a full-size LCD screen (liquid crystal display — similar to many digital wrist watches) on a fold-down lid instead of a normal CRT monitor. Then, within the last year, others copied them, making the computer even smaller and lighter. The smallest I've seen so far, which is from Toshiba, weighs only 9 pounds and costs about \$2,000.

The key feature of these portable machines, in addition to their small size and light weight, is that they run all programs designed for the regular-size IBM PCs. This makes them handy for use by business executives and salespeople on the road; they can easily transferr their work to a desktop computer when they return.

Surprising drawbacks

With so many attractive features, it is easy to see why the advertising copywriters went wild. Many journalists were taken in by the hype as well, and I was surprised to see many overly favorable reviews of the equipment in the trade press.

In the case of the hard disks mounted on drop-in circuit boards, three significant drawbacks were ignored:

✓ Price. The new hard disks cost 30 percent to 50 percent more than the conventionally mounted ones, even when installation of the conventional drives by a local dealer is included. The prices may eventually drop — but in the meantime they seem terribly overpriced.

✓ Local service. True, it's not hard to remove the cover of our computer and plug in a board, but there's more to it than that! Have you ever tried a computer-related product that worked perfectly, exactly the way you expected, the first time you tried it? I haven't, and that's the rub. You typically *need* local service, and it's typically not offered when you buy from mail-order companies.

✓ Limited slots. Finally, these boards take up a valuable open slot in your computer, preventing the use of the slot for other expansion boards or peripherals.

Regarding the portable IBM-PC compatible computers with LCD screens, there is a drawback obvious only with sustained use:

✓ Eyestrain. The liquid crystal display is fine for wrist watches, and OK for up to 20 or 30 minutes of use, but utterly unacceptable for continuous business use. The display depends on ambient light (the light in the room) to reflect off the characters — but it also reflects glare and other images in the room!

THE BOTTOM LINE: Both these products will be improved over time. The liquid crystal display screens on the portable computers will eventually be enhanced to create less eyestrain, and the prices of drop-in hard disks on circuit boards will drop. Meanwhile, they deserve *watching*, not buying.

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